



The Seventh Year: Sabbatical or *Shemittah*?

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ויקרא כה: א'-ז'

וידבר ה' אל משה בהר סיני לאמר: דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם ושבתה הארץ שבת לה: שש שנים תזרע שדה ושש שנים תזמר כרמך ואספת את תבואתה: ובשנה השביעית שבת שבתון יהיה לארץ שבת לה: שדה לא תזרע וכרמך לא תזמר: את ספיס קצירך לא תקצור ואת ענבי גזירך לא תבצר שנת שבתון יהיה לארץ: והיתה שבת הארץ לכם לאכלה לך ולעבדך ולאמנתך ולשכירך ולתושבך הגרים עמך: ולבהמתך ולחיה אשר בארצך תהיה כל תבואתה לאכל.

VaYikra 25:1-7

¹God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: ²Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of (*or: for*) God. ³Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. ⁴But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of (*or: for*) God: You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land, ⁶and whatever the land produces during its sabbath is for you to eat—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and bound laborers who live with you, ⁷and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.

Our *parashah* opens with a commandment to rest in the seventh year. We find such a commandment in the book of Shemot as well—though the two sources portray the seventh year in different terms that create distinct and unique experiences. In the following lines we shall compare the two.

The commandment in VaYikra applies to all of Israel, as a community, and is dependent upon their entering into the Land, “When you enter the land” (v. 2). The entity that must rest is the land itself, “the land shall observe a sabbath” (v. 4) and this resting is defined as being connected to the Divine, “a sabbath of (*or*: for) God” (vv. 2, 4).

How one must behave in the seventh year is primarily understood in contrast to the behavior during the other six. For six years the people of Israel work in the fields—planting, pruning, and harvesting. The seventh year stands in contrast, as a time during which, “you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard” (v. 4). There is no cutting of branches or picking of fruit in order that the land should experience, “a sabbath of complete rest” (v. 4). The Sabbatical year is defined by its prohibition. It is characterized by what may *not* be done for its duration. For six years a person’s life is characterized by continuous action, but come the seventh year, he is called to inaction. Moreover, this inaction is defined as having theological weight: “a sabbath *for the Lord*” (vv. 2, 4).

The produce of the land in the seventh year is designated for eating. It is primarily “yours” and also designated to others who are connected to you: “**your** male and female slaves, **your** hired and bound laborers who live **with you**, and **your** cattle and the beasts in **your** land” (vv. 6-7). All of these other entities who have access to eating the produce are defined by their relationship to the person who is commanded *vis-à-vis* the land. Therefore it appears that the produce is for the person who owns the land, and through him, all who serve him, live with him, including the animals he owns, and those who reside on his land.

The focus of the seventh year in VaYikra is on Sabbatical. The root of the word *sh.b.t* appears seven times over these verses and expresses withdrawal from work—human withdrawal from work which results in the land getting a shabbat. No one is permitted to act upon or guide the growth during that year, to manipulate the earth in any way, or to impose their power or will upon the ground. However, the shabbat of the earth is not one in which the earth doesn't produce any yield. It does produce, but without human interference. It is during this time that humanity is invited to observe nature without trying to exert power over it. The seventh year commands a person to do nothing in the face of his needs and dependence on the land, despite his own responsibility to others who depend on him. One has to rely on the land, be dependent upon it, and to trust it.

The opening verses of this section describes: “God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them” (vv. 1-2). The verses locate the command in Mount Sinai—the greatest moment of Divine communication with people. This framing clarifies that the shabbat of the Land is a critical component of the fundamental connection that exists between humanity and God, and suggests understanding the commandments regarding the seventh year from this vantage point. This is the crux of the theological weight of the expression “sabbath of (*or*: for) God.” It teaches us that in this year, we have to direct ourselves to, and find ourselves dependent, upon God. The seventh year obligates a person to recognize limitations, to rely on, and trust in, God.

The significance of situating these verses at Mt. Sinai is further strengthened by a *midrash*. In the book of Shemot, Moshe is described as reading the book of the covenant to all of Israel, “Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, “All that God has spoken we will faithfully do” (Shemot 24:7)! After this reading of the covenant and the acceptance of its content by the people of Israel, Moshe enacts a ceremonial confirmation of the sealing of the covenant between Israel and God: “Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that

God now makes with you concerning all these commands” (v. 8).

A *midrash* in the Mekhilta of R. Yishmael tries to identify what it was precisely that Moshe read to *Benei Yisrael* at that moment. R. Yishmael claims that Moshe actually read the verses from our *parashah*, the laws of the Sabbatical year among them, and that this served as the basis for receiving all the *mitzvot* at Sinai.¹

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God, the foundation upon which all the other *mitzvot* are based. Everything flows from the way that the seventh year invites us to recognize our dependence on nature, on God. This awareness of dependance is foundational and necessary to any connection relationship, and to the one with God as well, and therefore foundational to the acceptance of

all of the *mitzvot*.

We are also commanded to keep the seventh year in the Book of Shemot, but there the commandment has a very different character:

¹ **Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Massekhta deVaHodesh 3**

R. Yishmael says: At the beginning of the passage, what does [the Torah] say? “The land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of God. Six years you may sow your field...” [Then, the order of topics in this and following chapters:] the Sabbatical years, Jubilee years, and blessings and curses. At the end of the passage, what does it say? “These are the laws, rules, and instructions that God established[, through Moses on Mount Sinai, between Himself and the Israelite people]” (VaYikra 27:46). [The Israelites at Mount Sinai] said: We accept this upon ourselves. When [Moshe] saw that they accepted it, he took the blood and cast it upon the people, as it says: “Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people” (Shemot 24:8). He said to them: Behold now you are tied, bound, and caught. Tomorrow you will come and accept all of the *mitzvot* upon yourselves.

שמות כג, י-יא

וּשְׁשׁ שָׁנִים, תִּזְרַע אֶת-אֶרְצְךָ; וְאִסְפָּתָהּ, אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ. וְהִשְׁבִּיעַת תְּשַׁמְטָנָהּ וּנְטָשָׁתָהּ, וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִינֵי עַמְּךָ,
וְיִתְּרָם, תֹּאכַל חֵיט הַשָּׂדֶה; כֹּן-תַעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ, לְיִיתָד.

Shemot 23:10-11

¹⁰Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; and in the seventh you shall let it go and abandon it. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

Here the description of the *mitzvah* is spoken in the singular. The verses in Shemot are directed toward individuals. In Shemot, the land is not the object or subject of rest, actually we do not see the verb *sh.b.t.* (rest) at all here. Further, whereas in VaYikra the land is referred to on its own terms as “the land,” here the land is described as being owned, as being “your land.” The commandment in the seventh year is a product of this belonging, “in the seventh, you shall let it go and abandon it.” For six years the land only belongs to you, one owns the land, but in the seventh year one does not. A person has to act like one who has no property, one who is not a landowner, and do this by leaving the land alone, abandoning it completely and relinquishing all rights to the land.

Whereas Shemot also teaches how one should act in the seventh year through contrasting it with how one works in the other six years, “Six years you shall sow ...; and in the seventh you shall let it go and abandon it,” the contrast in Shemot is different. In VaYikra, the distinction is between activity and inactivity, between the permissibility or impermissibility of working the land. In Shemot, the behavior in the what is here called Shemittah year, year of “abandoning,” is treated as active, as a positive *mitzvah*. The person is not commanded to refrain from labor, rather she has to abandon her land and free it from her control. A person has an active responsibility to emancipate the land. During the six years we are the owners and controllers of our land, in the seventh year we have to let go, we must relinquish

our lot, our claim to the land.

Another *midrash* in the *Mekhilta* demands that a person actively demonstrate that they are relinquishing control over the land, stressing that it is insufficient to merely allow the poor to eat from one's crops. Rather, one must actually dismantle the fences around one's property:

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל משפטים - מסכתא דכספא פרשה כ

'ונטשתה', מפני מה אמרה תורה? לא שיאכלו אותה עניים? הרי אני מכניסה ומחלקה לעניים! תלמוד לומר: 'והשביעית תשמטנה' – 'ונטשתה' מגיד, שפורץ בה פרצות

Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael Massekhta deKaspa 20

“And abandon it” (Shemot 23:11). Why does the Torah say this? So that the poor can eat? I can collect it and distribute it to the poor! Therefore the verse says, “you shall let it go and abandon it”—meaning that you create breaches [in the fence].

One of the results of lack of ownership is lack of access to what the ground produces. In contrast to the book of VaYikra where “and whatever the land produces during its sabbath is for **you** to eat” (25:6), in Shemot the original, six-year owners are not listed as those who may eat from the land, rather: “Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat” (23:11). This year is a year of reversal, those who are usually owners of the land do not get to eat its produce.

There is another crucial element that is present in VaYikra, but absent in Shemot—the Divine component. God does not appear in Shemot at all. The activity in Shemot is seemingly restricted to the human realm. This absence of Divine interaction or relevance underscores the total social reversal that the seventh year represents. This is a year where the owners are not the owners, where the people on the outside become the people on the inside.

In conclusion:

Though, modern people in the Western world are, for the most part, removed from the land, we control so much property. VaYikra's vision of the seventh year demands that we recognize the dependence in our lives. Yet Shemot's paradigm of the seventh year also commands us to remove ourselves from ownership, to experience living without, perhaps as a basis from which to experience equality. Let us consider the meaning and difference between the two descriptions. For example, one paradigm concretizes the reality of dependence while the other invites us to experience a reality of "not." Are these two side of the same coin or fundamentally opposite experiences? What relationships does each suggest? Does dependence enhance relationships while an experience of "not" disconnects or releases? What are times when one needs a "Sabbath for the land, Sabbath for God," times that concretize dependence, and is there need for relinquishing ownership and experiencing "not" at other times?

With these questions we leave *parashiyot* BeHar-BeHukotai and move onto one thought in summary on the Book of VaYikra.

Leaving Sefer VaYikra: "Love your fellow as yourself: I am God" (19:18)

These lines conclude our present engagement with the Book of VaYikra. We have seen that the Book of VaYikra categorically rejects the distinction made between interpersonal laws that affect our relationship with other people, and ritual laws that reflect our relationship with God. This book creates a frame for understanding the theological dimensions of social laws, and the human dimension of the theological ones, those instances that seem to only affect the vertical relationship between a person and God.

So the laws of sacrifices include circumstances that are entirely interpersonal, (see VaYikra),² from the passing of Aharon's sons we learn to make space for human intuition in the face of an inclination to be stringent in the eyes of the law (see Shemini),³ the chapter that focused on the *tzara'at* affliction taught us that an entire social structure is embedded in the encounter between the afflicted person and the *Kohen* (see Tazria-Metzora),⁴ and similarly in our *parashah*, we see that the laws of the Sabbatical/*Shemittah* year which ask us to rescind our claims of ownership and instruct us in the ways that the social structure is impacted by questions of ownership, is titled “shabbat of/for the Lord.”

The Book of VaYikra concludes with stating that these matters have their origin in the revelation at Mt. Sinai, and that all of us—not just Aharon and his sons—are responsible to fulfill them: “These are the *mitzvot* that God commanded Moshe to the *Benei Yisrael* on Mount Sinai” (27:37).

Sefer VaYikra as a whole warns us against thinking erroneously that engaging in the realm of the sacred is separate from our social, human lives. At the same time it teaches us that our human actions carry theological weight.

² VaYikra 5777, “If He Does Not Give Information,” available [here](#).

³ Shemini 5777, “Regarding Mistaken Stringencies and Humanity that is Good in the Eyes of God,” available [here](#).

⁴ Tazria-Metzora 5777, “Subject, Object, and Reader,” available [here](#).